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AMBALA CONSPIRACY CASE OF 1864: MAULANA MOHAMMAD JAFAR THANESARI

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Abstract:-The Rebellion of 1857 was the first incident in the Indian history, which is still the topic of research after one hundred and fifty years continuous writing. However, a class of Ulema or Muslim Theologians, who had taken the most prominent part in the Rebellion, have not given the proper place until now. This research paper is a humble process to highlight their contribution, particularly Maulana Jafar Thanesari. The main focus in this work is the trial of Maulana Thanesari, the Jail torture and his love and passion for his country.

Keywords: Rebellion, Maulana, Ulema, Thanesari, Ambala

INTRODUCTION

The Rebellion of 1857 in India continued for more or less two years ultimately came to an end after mass level execution of the revolutionaries. However, the Indian Ulema, who were in front for the whole period of the Rebellion, and even many decades before its outbreak, continued their struggle in the frontier areas adjoining to Afghanistan. They occupied the Malka¹ and Ambeyla,² and in alliance of the frontier tribes, gave tough resistance to the British forces. They recruited their fighters from the Muslim cities in the Punjab, Bihar, and Bengal. The Ulema of the plain areas supplied them men and money to carry on Jihad against the British. The British forces became victorious over the mountains and started a suppressive measure in the plains of India. A number of leaders were condemned to death, subsequently commuted to transportation for life on the Andaman Islands, and others sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. In these suppressive measures Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari was also arrested and charged for assisting the revolutionary Ulema in frontier areas of Afghanistan's border by supplying money to wage war against the British. The Ambala trial was held in 1864 by Sir Herbert Edwardes, before whom eleven prisoners were brought including Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari.

EARLY CAREER:

Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari was born in 1838 in Thanesar of district Ambala, Punjab. Due to his father Miyan Jeewan's death in his childhood, he got his education in patronage of his mother, a very pious a saintly in her nature. From the very beginning, he got the religious education and very wisely learned that how the British had forcefully occupied the country. He was taught the lessons that the British Government was adopting the anti-Muslim policy and particularly targeting the Ulema. At that time the religious activities of the followers of Sayyad Ahmad of Bareilly were at peak under the aegis of the movement of Shah Waliullah. Under the influence on the philosophy of Sayyad Ahmad Bareilly (the so-called Wahabi Movement), Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari jumped in the Jihad against the British power.

ROLE IN THE UPRISING OF 1857:

His role in the Uprising of 1857 is not much known, but the Deoband Ulema claims that Maulana Jafar Thanesari gave tough resistance to the British from the Ambala side. At that time, he was a young revolutionary of merely 19 years old and was not much popular as Ghazi or Mujahid. He might have fought under the command of some other revolutionary cleric. That's why the British brutality could not reach to his neck when the torture was carried on by the British throughout the northern India. William Wilson Hunter also gives the account as follows:³

“When the mutiny of 1857 broke out, Jafar chose twelve of his most trustworthy disciples, and repaired to the Rebel

Camp. Even in the unwonted work of fighting his force of character made him conspicuous, and he gained the reputation of being a man fit to be trusted with treasonable secrets. Upon the downfall of the rebel hopes at Dehli, he returned to his attorney's business at Thaneswar, brooding over the inscrutable decree of Providence which had given victory to the Unbelievers, and more than ever discontented with what he calls 'this exceedingly dirty business of Petition-writing.' Open force had failed, and it remained to be seen what could be effected by secret conspiracy. Jafar soon became a member of the widespread Wahabi confederacy. His secret duties threw a religious halo even over his detested profession; for 'be it known,' he writes at this period, 'I do this by order of a Certain Person, and for a Hidden Object.' This Certain Person was Maulvi Yahya Ali of Patna, Spiritual Director of the Wahabi sect in India. The Hidden Object was the forwarding of recruits and munitions of war to the Wahabi colony on the Mahaban, then in open hostilities against the British Crown.”

Although, the utmost torture was inflicted upon the Indian Ulema after the suppression of the Rebellion of 1857 in the planes, yet they carried on their Holy War against the British. The Ulema, along with the tribes from the North-West Frontier area, continued their Jihad in the later phase of the war against the British. Undoubtedly, due to its favourable strategic position, the North-West Frontier area was the strongest and safest place to continue the war for the long time to uproot the British Empire from India.

ROLE IN THE FRONTIER WAR OF 1863-64:

Towards the end of 1863, a great war started in the Yaghistan territory, at the western frontier of India. General Chamberlain was in command of the British troops, which suffered many casualties in the Ambeyla Pass area. Mulla Abdul Ghafur and Akhund of Swat, accompanied by many of his disciples, rushed to the front to fight the invaders. A large number of Afghans and local Pathans, in their own defence, also joined the battle against the British army. The Mujahideen fought valiantly in their passion for martyrdom, and the masses also rose up against the British to guard their liberty. In this fierce battle which lasted about two or three months, General Chamberlain himself was gravely wounded and the casualties soared to about seven thousand.⁴

Maulana Jafar Thanesari was most active in the later phase of this war of independence and in connections of supplying money and men to the Frontier Mujahideen, he was arrested. The story begins with Ghazan Khān, who was a sergeant of the mounted police posted at Paniput Station in the Karnal district. Ghazan Khan originally belonged to Hooti Mardan of Patta Kamal Zai. Before the Battle of Sittana, while roaming on his duty, he saw few Bengali Muslims and asked their whereabouts. They replied that they were coming from Malka and going to meet Munshi Jafar at Thanesar. They also advised Ghazan Khan to resign from the service and follow them to the Frontier, where a tough battle was going to be fought against the British.⁵

However, Ghazan Khan arrested the four strangers, prepared a report against them, brought them to Magistrates Court at Panipat, but they were released in lack of proofs. Ghazan Khan now decided to disclose the conspiracy against the British which was going on in the Frontier areas. He instructed his son Firoz of the village Hamza Khan to go to Malka, Sittana and Khabbal to know more about the Revolutionary Ulema. He became successful to know the fact from the local tribals that they were funded by Maulana Jafar Thanesari, who was popularly known as “Peer-o-Khalifa”. Ghazan Khan sent all his reports to his officer for further action. On 11th December 1863, the Deputy Commissioner of Karnal alleged that Maulana Jafar Thanesari was complicit in the supply of money and men to the Mujahideen fighting on the frontier. The Police came to the action according to the British Government instructions.⁶

Hunter says that Munshi Jafar of Thaneswar, whom men call Khalifa, was the great man who passed up the Bengalis and their carbines and rifles. Maulana Thanesari also affirms in his account titled, 'Counsels of Jafar' that Police Superintendent Captain Parsons searched his house and found a letter which contained a coded message about the dispatch of a few thousand guineas. The letter was addressed to send the six thousand white and three hundred red grains for tasbih. Although there was a proof of his involvement in the Frontier War, the Police only arrested two of his companions Munshi Abdul Ghafoor a resident of Gaya district in the Bihar province who was working as a clerk at his office, and Abbas a Bengali boy who used to sleep in his sitting suite. Maulana Thanesari was left alone at his house and find chance to escape. He decided to go to Delhi and left his wife, children, mother and younger brother Mohammad Sayeed at Panipat in the way.⁷

In Delhi, he stayed at Miyan Nasiruddin's residence where Thanesari, Maulana Husaini Azimabadi and Muazzam Sardar were already present with the guineas. Maulana Thanesari handed over the guineas to Miyan Husaini Thanesari with instruction to carry this sacred consignment as expeditiously as possible to the caravan of the Mujahideen. Maulana Thanesari himself writes, “I was about twenty-five years old then and brimming with religious zeal. I paid no attention to the ups and downs of what took place in the world and had complete faith that God would take care of all matters concerning me since it was His Cause that I was pursuing.”⁸

At Thanesar, Captain Parsons along with his Police team again marched and in order to arrest Maulana Jafar Thanesari; they searched hundreds of houses and apprehended scores of men and women. His old mother, twelve or thirteen-year-old brother Mohammad Sayeed, and his wife were all arrested and excessively beaten and tortured. Even purdah-observing housewives were subjected to heartrending cruelty and dishonor. Posters advertising a Rs. 10,000 award for his arrest were distributed. He tortured the juvenile Mohammad Sayeed who ultimately told the address and whereabouts of Maulana Jafar Thanesari. He also searched the Peepli Post Office for his letters. The Post Master handed over Captain Parsons a

letter containing the matter of the same grains. It was told in the letter that the white and red grains had been sent through Miyan Husaini Azimabadi from Azimabad (Patna). It was presumed that red grains were guineas (gold coins) and white grains were rupees (silver coins). In this connection Captain Parsons raided houses of Maulana Yahya Ali and Maulana Abdur Rahim at Patna. They were arrested and brought the Ambala Jail.⁹

Maulana Jafar Thanesari, along with Husaini Azimabadi and Muazzam Sardar, left Delhi for Ambala via Aligarh. He wanted to know about his case and find out the identity of the informer. Police also reached in Delhi and after knowing that he had departed to Aligarh, an order of his arrest was telegraphed to Aligarh. On reaching Aligarh, they were immediately arrested and put in tight custody. They were brought to Ambala via Delhi and Karnal. As Maulana Jafar Thanesari was considered a mastermind in this case, he suffered enough torture and beating in the police custody.¹⁰

Maulana Thanesari says, “the guards on duty at the Aligarh jail asked me what kind of crime I had committed that required the stationing of three men to guard my cell, when usually a single watchman is sufficient even for criminals condemned to death. I replied, 'I shirked from the duty that my Master had assigned to me. That is why He is angry with me and had He captured en route while I was fleeing'.”¹¹

Maulvi Husaini Thanesari, according to the instructions of Maulana Jafar left Delhi for Amritsar via Karnal. At Peepli he was enquired by Naib Tehsildar Barkat Ali. Maulvi Husaini told that he was coming after having a sacred bath from Thanesar. Nevertheless, the Muslim Tehsildar arrested him on doubt and found 290 guineas and 53 rupees on his search. He was also send to the Ambala Jail in the same case.¹²

TRIAL IN AMBALA COURT:

During April 1864, the case was prepared against 11 accused namely Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari, Shaikh Mohammad Shafi Thekedar, Maulana Yahya Ali Azimabadi, Maulana Abdur Rahim Azimabadi, Qazi Miyan Abdul Ghaffar, Qazi Miyan Jaan, Munshi Abdul Karim Ambalvi, Husaini Thanesari, Abdul Ghafoor Shahabadi, Husaini Azimabadi, and Alahi Baksh Azimabadi. The case was presented for trial to the Ambala Magistrate's Court as Ambala Conspiracy Case. Mr. Goodall, a barrister practicing law in the Magistrate's Court was lawyer of the accused. Under the threat of hanging, Mohammad Sayeed brother of Maulana Jafar Thanesari, and Mohammad Rafi brother of Shaikh Mohammad Shafi Thekedar, were turned approver against the accused. Using similar threats, fifty to sixty other people also were recruited as approvers, the majority of these consisting of Maulvis and Mullahs. A young boy Abbas, who had lived for a long period in Maulana Thanesari's house was prepared to witness against the accused. He was expected to parrot a fabricated and false statement that he was taught, but after looking at his master with feelings of affection, he hesitated in testifying against him. The same evening this child was beaten so brutally that he died from the injuries.¹³

After a week's trial in the Magistrate's Court, the case was transferred to the Ambala Session Court under Major Herbert Edwardes, the Presiding Judge. All the accused were charged under Section 121 of Indian Penal Code. At the Session Court, another attorney, Mr. Plowden was hired to fight the case of the accused. So the two lawyers represented the ten defendants while Maulana Thanesari was his own attorney. Four noblemen from the Ambala district, two being Hindus and two Muslims, were appointed as Assessors. Mr. Plowden, pleaded that since the sites, such as Malka and Sittana, where the battles took place were situated outside the Government territories, the Government's case, accusing the defendants of assisting the combatants there, was without merit. He argued that terms such as “taking up arms,” “Her Majesty the Queen,” and “rebellion”, mentioned in Article 121 of the Indian Penal Code were inapplicable to any wars taking place outside the Government's territories.¹⁴

After completing its proper hearing, the Session Court, on 2nd May 1864, gave its decision in support of the British Government. The Session Judge also addressed Maulana Jafar Thanesari as follows:¹⁵

“You are a clever and knowledgeable person. You know the law. You are also a nobleman and the Nambardar of your city. But you used all your knowledge of the law and your intelligence to combat the Government. You undertook to supply men and money to the enemies of the Government. Except when trying to refute the argument in the trial, you never uttered a word of loyalty to the Government, and never helped anyone prove that you meant well. You will therefore be hanged, and all your assets will be confiscated by the Government. Even your dead corpse will not be given to your heirs, but will be buried with ignominy in the jail graveyard” He finally added, “It will give me great pleasure to see you hanged.” Maulana Thanesari responded to the last sentence and said, “I said, it is up to God, not up to you, to decide who lives and who dies. God Almighty has the power to end your life before mine”

For three of them namely Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari Maulvi Yahya Ali and Shaikh Mohammad Shafi, the sentence was to be hanged. For the other eight culpable persons, the sentence was transportation for life and confiscation of all property. In response to the decision of the Court, Maulana expressed the happiness, but the audiences were started crying. Some policemen under the orders of Captain Parsons, the superintendent of Police, approached him and said, “You have been sentenced to be hanged. You should be crying. Why are you so cheerful” Maulana answered them, “Because we are hopeful that we will attain martyrdom, which is the greatest blessing. Nevertheless, you cannot comprehend that.”¹⁶

The two defence attorneys, having received some extra fees, went to the Chief Court, but again, the case was postponed for a few days for further consultation. During the trial, they were defended by English Counsel; six of their countrymen sat as Assessors with the Judge on the bench; and the trial ended in the condemnation of eight of them to

transportation for life, and of the remaining three to the last penalty under the law. In between the British Government became successful in alluring the six accused out of eight who were sentenced for transportation. They were Shaikh Mohammad Shafi Ambalvi, Munshi Abdul Karim, Ilahi Baksh, Miyan Husaini Thanesari, Husaini Azimabadi, Qazi Miyan Abdul Ghafaar. The seventh, Qazi Miyan Jaan was died during the trial. Only one, out of the eight transportation convicts, Abdul Ghafoor was not turned against his allies and suffered the transportation punishment.¹⁷

On 6th of September, the Deputy Commissioner of Ambala read to him the Chief Court's Order that since they rejoiced at their sentence of hanging, regarding it as martyrdom, the Government, which had no desire to give them their coveted punishment, had commuted their death sentence to lifetime imprisonment overseas. The Three, including Maulana Jafar Thanesari were shifted to the regular jail. According to Maulana Jafar, “Following the jail regulations, our beards, mustaches, and hair were clipped short with scissors, making us look like fleeced sheep.”¹⁸

STAY IN THE ANDAMAN ISLANDS:

Maulana Jafar Thanesari along with his companion Maulvi Yahya Ali and remaining others journeyed to Black Water on 8th December 1865, from Bombay on the boat and reached Port Blair of Andaman on 11th January 1866, after thirty four days of sailing. Maulana Jafar Thanesari writes, “From that day to the date when we were set free, we never had to suffer living in jail cells, wearing prisoner garbs, or eating in the mess with other prisoners. So, for all practical purposes, we became free persons on that day, even though we stayed confined to Black Water for another eighteen years.”¹⁹

After a week of landing him on the Island, Maulana Thanesari was appointed as Deputy Head Clerk in the Court attached to the offices of the Superintendent and the Chief Commissioner. He moved into a comfortable house, and not the barracks in which convicts usually lived in the initial phase of their stay in the Andamans. The Maulana was given full freedom within the confines of the penal colony, and, to make life even easier; he was assigned a servant, whose wages were paid by the settlement authorities. At the age of 27, he was married with a Kashmiri girl but when she died in 1868, he got married to another girl, Brahmin by caste, from Almora. Maulana Jafar says, “I applied once again for my wife to be allowed to move from Panipat to join me, but this time she herself seemed hesitant to relocate. Later, she showed some willingness, but the authorities rejected my application. I organized a big feast during which she embraced Islam. After she had thoroughly learned the Pillars of Islam and the prayer rituals, etc., I reported our intention to wed to the authorities and married her on 15th April 1870. Hundreds of people attended the ceremony. The marriage was solemnized by Maulana Ahmadullah. A splendid reception took place the next day.”²⁰

When Maulana Jafar Thanesari freed in 1885, after twenty years in that island, and returned in India with his wife and many children, he found that all his possessions, including houses, lands, and farms, had been seized by the government and auctioned off.²¹

CONCLUSIONS:

Maulana Jafar Thanesari played the active part in the Rebellion of 1857, but being the underage revolutionary, he was cautiously noticed by the British Government. The Indian Ulema, who were in front for the whole period of the Rebellion, and even many decades before its outbreak, continued their struggle in the frontier areas adjoining to Afghanistan. Maulana Thanesari performed his duties for supplying men, money and arms for the Muslim fighters. They occupied the Malka and Ambeyla, and in alliance of the frontier tribes, gave tough resistance to the British forces. They recruited their fighters from the Muslim cities in the Punjab, Bihar, and Bengal. The Ulema of the plain areas supplied them men and money to carry on Jihad against the British. The British forces became victorious over the mountains and started a suppressive measure in the plains of India. In these suppressive measures Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari was also arrested and charged for assisting the revolutionary Ulema in frontier areas of Afghanistan's border by supplying money to wage war against the British. The Ambala trial was held in 1864 by Sir Herbert Edwardes, before whom eleven prisoners were brought including Maulana Mohammad Jafar Thanesari. Firstly Maulana was given death sentence but later on given deportation to the Islands of Andaman or Kala Pani.

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1. Malka, a village in the mountainous region of North-West-Frontier area, attached to the Afghanistan border, inhabited by the

Pathan tribes, was in the control of the revolutionary Ulema or Mujahideen. After the death of their cherished leader Maulvi Wilayat Ali and Inayat Ali Sadiqpuri, the Ulema or so-called Wahabis continued their struggle under the newly appointed leaders. After the death of Maulvi Maqsood Ali in 1861, Maulvi Abdullah Sadiqpuri (Azimabadi) son of Maulvi Wilayat Ali, boldly occupied Sitana in 1863. However, British forces cunningly won over the Bonair tribe which proved serious blow to the revolutionary Ulema. Some other tribes from the area also followed the same. On the guidance of the Bonair tribe, the British forces completely routed their centre Malka. The remaining forces of the revolutionary Ulema under Maulvi Abdullah rushed to the mountains of Afghanistan in order to prepare for another war. The British attempt to attack on Malka and series of arrests in the plains, achieved nothing beyond uniting the Pathan tribes against the British and raising the prestige of the revolutionary Ulema as champions of Islam. (Hunter, William Wilson, The Indian Musalmans, London, 1876, p. 27, see also Bakshi, S.R. & Chaturvedi, Ritu, Bihar Through the Ages, Vol.3, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 307-308)

2.Ambeyla was a village in the mountainous region of North West Frontier area attached to the Afghanistan border. It was popularly known as Ambeyla Pass. The revolutionary Ulema had control over it and gave tough resistance to the British. The Afghan tribes under the influence of these Ulema, were bitterly against the British. However, it was the prestige issue for the mighty British Government to suppress these Afghan tribes. On the 18th October 1863, a British Army of 7000 men, under General Sir Neville Chamberlain, moved out to the Ambeyla Pass. The fighting men against the British were around 53,500, including the men among the tribes, Husainzai, 2000; Akazai, 1000; Chigazai, 6000; Madakhail, 4000; Amaz, 1500; Jaduns, 4000; Khuddkhail, 2000; Bonaire, 12,000; Bajaure, 3000; Ranizai, 2000; Dher Clan, 6000; Swat tribes, 10,000. Keeping in view of the strength of the tribals, the British were further reinforced with around 2000 men but could not dare to advance the fanatic colony Malka; although, they repulsed the small skirmishes and night attacks. Nevertheless, they could not sustain in the daily attack and met the heavy loss. It was the 25th December 1863, perhaps due to the tricks; the British were able to turn back most of the tribes, and finding the situation in their favour; they advanced and burned the Ambeyla village. (The Indian Musalmans, pp. 30-38)

3.The Indian Musalmans, p. 90

4.The Annual of Urdu Studies, (Kaala Paani: Tavarikh-e-Ajib, Mohammad Jafar Thanesari, Eng. Tr. S. Kamal Abdali), Vol. 26, Madison, USA, 2011, p. 172

5.Qasmi, Aatur Rahman, 1857 Aur Haryana, New Delhi, 2011, p. 24 (taken from Sarguzisht-i-Mujahideen, p. 259)

6.Ibid, pp. 24-25,

7.The Annual of Urdu Studies, pp. 173-174, see also Indian Musalmans, p. 87, and 1857 Aur Haryana, p. 26

8.Ibid, pp. 175-176, see also 1857 Aur Haryana, pp. 26-27

9.Ibid, see also 1857 Aur Haryana, pp. 26-27

10.Ibid, pp. 176-177

11.Ibid, p. 178

12.1857 Aur Haryana, p. 29

13.1857 Aur Haryana, pp. 31-32, see also The Annual of Urdu Studies, p. 181

14.The Annual of Urdu Studies, pp. 182-83

15.The Annual of Urdu Studies, p. 184 (The Judge, Sir Herbert Edwardes, died from pneumonia three and a half years later and the sentence of death of Maulana Thanesari was converted into life imprisonment and later released.)

16.Ibid, p. 185

17.Ibid, pp. 186-187, see also 1857 Aur Haryana, pp. 40-41 (When the Ambala Conspiracy Case was in the Punjab Chief Court, the British arrested another brother of Maulvi Yahya Ali and Maulvi Abdur Rahim, Maulana Ahmadullah Azimabadi from Patna. After a short trial he was also transported to Andaman Islands. See 1857 Aur Haryana, pp. 40-41)

18.Ibid, p. 188

19.Ibid, pp. 190-192, see also Indian Musalmans, pp. 84-85

20.Ibid, pp. 200-204

21.Ibid, p. 213

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